“Gambling is Gambling”

Creating Decontextualized Space at an Indian Racecourse

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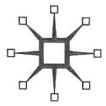

A COMPARATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY OF ALTERNATIVE SPACES

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CHAPTER 3

"GAMBLING IS GAMBLING": CREATING DECONTEXTUALIZED SPACE AT AN INDIAN RACECOURSE

Stine Simonsen Puri

Horseracing was introduced to India by British army officers, who organized the first two-day racing meeting in 1798 in Bombay (Chettiyappaya 1995, 11). By 1885, there were 76 operating racecourses that were established all over India, and horseracing had become a popular spectator sport for the British army officers as well as for the Indian royals. Around the 1890s, along with the introduction of organized betting facilities, the racecourses were furthermore opened up to the general Indian public (Surita 2012) in line with the trend in England (Reith 2006, 80). After Indian independence, racecourses remained in prime locations in the major Indian cities now taken over by the Indian state. When TV coverage of races along with interstate betting were introduced in the 1980s, it became possible to bet on races all over India from any of these racecourses, or from some of the racecourses not in use for races, which now only operate as a ground for betting. Since this time, there has been a steady increase in horse betting in India. Official numbers show that between 2001 and 2010, the betting amount increased from 246 to 455 million dollars. These numbers however, only include those bets that have been placed legally, and on which government taxes

have been paid. The estimations of the extent of illegal betting, taking place both inside and outside the race courses are, according to gamblers and bookmakers I have spoken to, up to 90 percent, which judging from my own observations seems to be about right.

Most gambling forms are illegal in India. Only two states, Goa and Sikkim, currently allow casinos, and a couple of more states allow lotteries. In several other cities, horseracing is the only legal form of gambling. This is tied to legislation introduced in the 1880s, where a distinction was made between games of chance and games of skill (Hardgrove 2005; Birla 2009). Legislation and public debates on gambling have, as is also the case in England and the United States, been tied to issues of class (Munting 1996). Horseracing was then, and still is, defined by the Indian Supreme Court, as a game of skill, unlike other forms of betting of the masses considered as mere gambling. Despite this, betting is done on several other kinds of sports (mostly cricket, and also tennis and golf) through bookmakers over the telephone, which adds up to a total betting market estimated at 60 billion dollars (Thompson 2009).

Next to the racecourse at which I conducted my fieldwork are governmental buildings, air force land as well as the Gymkhana Club, an exclusive membership club where the Indian elite come to socialize. Despite its central location, the racecourse is not a place known to the city's inhabitants. Without knowing it, I had passed it several hundred times before the racecourse became the field of my study on gambling in India. At the entrance of the racecourse there are hardly any signs besides the signs to the respected Polo Ground positioned inside the racetracks. There is a small ticket booth where men buy their entrance fee for 40 rupees and 20 for women. For those who cannot afford that, there is a small betting booth next to the entrance, where the drivers of the punters, as well as people from the slums surrounding the racecourse place their bets. Betting on horses in India is for everybody, rich and poor, yet the majority are from the middle class.

In terms of religious affiliation, there are a majority of Hindus and Sikhs, along with a smaller number of Muslims. They range between 30 and 80 years of age, with a relatively large proportion of older men. Once inside, one follows the cycle of the races and the odds; over a period of approximately 5 hours there are races every 30 minutes, lasting less than 2 minutes each, and a period of 15 minutes in which odds on the next races are offered. Except for one day a week, the races are taking place in some other city, and can be followed on the TV screens. This is one of the reasons why the center of gravity of the place is not at the track, but in "the ring," which is a space encircled by 24 bookmakers' booths,

in which most of the betting is taking place. Punters upon entering the racecourse walk in a straight line with a brisk pace toward the ring, in order to get an idea of the odds as early as possible. Just after a race, there are about 10 minutes before the odds for the next race comes up on boards, and before the money is released to the winners. During this time, most punters hang out outside the ring. For a group of members this time is spent in the members' room, for others the time is spent in a modern café, or at one of the *dhabas* or street kitchens, and the remaining are chilling out on run-down benches. The crowd is with a few exceptions male, and more or less everyone present participates in betting. Overall there is a happy atmosphere, with music in between the races and a lot of chitchatting.

An Evening at the Club with Some Gamblers

After a long day at the races, I walked over to the Gymkhana Club to meet Amitabh[1] in the card room. Amitabh had been one of my gambling partners at the racecourse for some months, and I was now hoping to have a private talk with him at the Club. Amitabh, a man in his 70s, had earned a membership in the prestigious Gymkhana Club as well as in the Defense Club and Air Force Club from serving in the Indian air force. Everyday after the races, he went straight to one of these clubs to play/gamble cards. According to Amitabh, he had been a gambler since the age of 6, when he started placing bets on a game using ceramic balls used in soda bottles in the streets of a Pakistani city. After they had fled to India after independence, his father worked in the railways, while his mother was taking care of Amitabh and his seven brothers and sisters with very few material means. Amitabh had told me that through public education and a bit of luck related to Indian politics, he managed to get himself into the air force, which opened up a new world to him. While in the air force, he was exposed to horse racing early on, as many racecourses were situated around army and air force land. He started betting or "backing horses" when he was 23 years old, when posted in southern India.

Today, I was planning to ask him a lot of questions. At the racecourse, conversations were often focused on the game only, and therefore I saw the different setting as an opportunity to get further insights into his nongambling life, as well as reflections related to the morality of gambling. Upon meeting him in the card room, I realized that he had other plans, as he invited everyone around the table to join us in the bar. As we sat down at a table in the bar, Amitabh introduced me to the group: "You have all kinds of gamblers here, all backing horses as well. Vijay there

who is gambling on selected races only, Ajay who is doing handicapping [a method of predicting outcomes through quantitative methods] and Alok who plays on information." Alok then introduced Amitabh, "and Amitabh is a gambler who either plays favorites or 'eats' [play against] them." I had become used to this form of introduction, stripped from all information except the information related to the people as gamblers. This was in sharp contrast to the introduction rituals that I had become accustomed to through my Indian in-laws, where a long time would be spent in describing whom one was a relative of, the location of one's home, the occupation of one's father, as well as of various kinds of achievements.

We started talking about the next day's races. After a while, I asked them what they would normally talk about together besides horse racing. Amitabh said that they would be telling jokes. He suggested that we could do a round of jokes, and I was asked to start. Totally unprepared, I tried to tell a joke about Norwegian language, which fell totally flat. Amitabh told a joke on the size of penises of men from different countries; Alok followed with a joke on Punjabis. Ajay ended the round with an anecdote about the most influential horse owner in India, known to be part of the Indian mafia. The horse owner had according to the story been demanded by a Spanish mafia boss to masturbate 12 times before he was given the permission to take his Spanish daughter for a ride. Everyone was laughing, I a bit hesitantly.

I was thinking about some of the questions on mythology that I had prepared for Amitabh, and thought I would take the chance to ask them in a group setting: "What do you think is the message of the dice game in the *Mahabarata*?" The Mahabarata is one of India's two great epics, which describes the war between two families, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Triggered by jealousy, the war eventually leads to major destruction and the beginning of the *kali yuga*, the age that we live in now, characterized by greed. The war basically starts as a consequence of a game of dice, in which a Pandava, Yudishtra (a somewhat good guy) loses everything to the Kauravas (the somewhat bad guys) in an unfair game of dice—including his wife Draupadi.

Ajay gave his version of the significance of the story: "It is showing how you lose everything you have in gambling, irrespectively of how much you have, what you have, you lose." Alok continued: "Hinduism is not a religion, it does not ban you from doing things, like for the Muslims. It is a code of life. It is about how to be a good human being. As long as you keep your duties you can be a good human being." I asked, "But does gambling make it difficult to keep your duties?" Ajay acknowledged

my tricky question and smiled. "Yes, it does." Ajay continued, "I am a Brahmin, they all (pointing at Alok, Amitabh and Vijay) they are doing services (a way to denote the lower Banya caste). I don't believe in God... I believe in the cosmos." I was surprised. This was the first (and last) time I ever heard a mention of caste. I was unsure of what to do with it and asked: "I think there are very few Brahmins at the racecourse aren't there?" Ajay answered: "There are many, but gambling has nothing to do with that. Gambling is all about what is inside you." As caste is tied to notions of destiny, I continued: "Do you believe in destiny, and do you think that gambling can be part of your destiny?" Amitabh: "Yes, I believe in destiny, but gambling has nothing to do with it. Destiny decides what you are given in life. But *gambling is gambling.*"

This kind of conversation could only take place outside the racecourse. A talk like that would also occur only if I would initiate it, and pursue it. If I just went along the line of conversation of my informants, it would concentrate on gambling, horse racing, and jokes. I have chosen the above example as it gives an introductory sense of how nongambling life is kept out of the gambling space, and also because it is an example of the use of a particular phrase that I heard again and again, namely, "gambling is gambling," which I have used to title this chapter. From the ethnography one may abstract points about perceptions of duty and destiny among other things, however, here I use it to give an idea of the kind of contextual practice, in which gambling is constructed as a self-referential frame, which I argue is a way in which alternative moral spaces may be created.

Contextualization and Decontextualization

In his book, *The Problem of Context,* Roy Dilley reviews how context has been thought of in anthropology as well as in other disciplines. Dilley sheds light on the generation of contexts that he calls "contextualizing moves," as an interpretative strategy of articulating connections and disconnections (Dilley 1999, 37–39). Through such "moves," something is understood and made meaningful by drawing a connection to something else. Contextualization is not just an analytical methodology practiced by academics, but also something practiced by informants. In other words, one not just has to understand the practice of our informants in relationship to contexts, which we as researchers find relevant, but one should also pay attention to which contexts our informants use to impose meaning on what they do and say.

As I started my fieldwork I was eager to explore the context of religion and class in relationship to gambling, because of the above mentioned

Hindu myth on gambling as well as the colonial upper-class history of horse racing. However, in paying attention to the construction of context of my informants, what struck me was the lack of importance given to such contexts. This was first brought to my attention in relationship to the history of horse racing. Choosing a racecourse as my field, I assumed that its connection to the British as well as the Indian royalties would be used by gamblers to somehow legitimize their gambling to the outside world as a "sport of kings," and to position themselves along this body of knowledge in relationship to other gamblers. However, there was hardly any mention about the glorious history of horse racing.

This could be seen as part of a decolonization of the sport, similar to what Arjun Appadurai has observed in the history of cricket in India (Appadurai 1995). However, unlike the national sport of cricket, horse racing has not undergone a process of vernacularization, which enabled a transformation from a sport representing Victorian values and colonial power structures to one that is the epitome of Indian nationalism (as well as commercialism). Rather, the sport has been left to itself and the gambling industry, mostly, with minimal symbolic significance in the public sphere, leaving the history of horse racing untouched for symbolic reinterpretations. The phrase "gambling is gambling," illustrates this decontextualization, in which the racecourses are established as a ground divorced from general popular concerns and values. This at first seemed to be an empty prefabricated statement to me. It was often part of an answer to questions in which I tried to connect gambling to some general structures or ideologies existing in urban India, as in the above example. With the answer "gambling is gambling," gambling is established as the context for gambling, and in that sense it is decontextualized, at least in relationship to the context, which to me seemed relevant. The phrase can be compared with "It is what it is," which is a statement through which one may isolate an event or a practice from external concerns or standards of legitimacy. Another popular phrase in this family that refers more directly to gambling is "What happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas."

Along with linguistic theory on context, Dilley sets forth a differentiation between external and internal contextualization, where external point to a "different domain of phenomena or order of existence to the one under study" and internal contexts, which are "contained within a closed system of like entities" (Dilley 1999, 14). The context I was trying to establish in relationship to gambling was external to it, as I was trying to establish nongambling life as a context for gambling life. However, my informants pointed toward internal contexts of relevance, which eventually made me pay more attention to the actual game that

they and I was taking part in at the racecourse. The internal contexts, or domains of knowledge, were restricted to the games at the racecourses and among other things had to do with friendship and trustworthiness, economics, and notions of time. What was going on at the Mumbai racecourse thousands of kilometers away was relevant, but what was going on right outside the gate of the racecourse was not. Thus, I do not see the decontextualization move as a sign of an inability to understand their gambling practice in context to "regular life," grounded in a lack of knowledge. Rather, I see this decontextualization as a choice, which is at the center of understanding what gambling is about in relationship to human life. I will come back to this point later, when bringing Bateson into the discussion.

Ignorance, Secrecy and Jest—on the Practice of Separation

Decontextualization and the use of internal points of reference for understanding the activity of gambling produces a boundary between inside and outside the gambling sphere, and this boundary is upheld and safeguarded by a range of practices. Here I will focus on ignorance, secrecy, and the use of jokes. In a later text from 2010, *The Problem of Ignorance*, Dilley argues that ignorance cannot only be understood as a lack of information, but should also be seen as a "willed and intentional stance towards the world" (Dilley 2010, 177). In other words, ignorance is not just the opposite of knowledge, but also something that is being "played out" in social relations: in other words it is a social practice.

Here I wish to return to Amitabh. Sometime after the evening at the Gymkhana Club, I met with Amitabh's wife, Shonali, who I had come to know after having succeeded in inviting myself for dinner at their home. It had otherwise been rather difficult for me to get in touch with the gamblers' wives, since the gamblers were generally not too eager to introduce me to their family life. I had encountered many girl friends—but few wives. Shonali had met Amitabh around the time when Amitabh started betting on horses. They, as a relatively large number of gamblers, had a so-called love marriage as opposed to an arranged marriage. She confided to me that shortly after marriage she realized the extent of her husband's "poor habits," which did not only involve gambling, but also a lot of women and alcohol.

After answering many of my questions, she asked *me* a question. "This Monty guy who is a friend of my husband's, who is he? Do you know him?" I happened to know Monty very well and told her a few things

about him. She said that she did not know anything about any of her husband's friends. Most of them, she did not want to know about, however Monty had struck her as a nice person. I asked why she had not asked Amitabh himself. She looked at me and said: "I would never do that. I don't like to nag. I am also sure that you are not the kind of person who would ask questions, are you?" I said I was not sure about that. She went on to tell about Amitabh's sister, who she clearly thought of as of a lower class than herself, and who would ask questions all the time. She told of an occasion when her sister-in-law had made a big scene when her husband had not come home at night. Shonali looked disgusted. "I don't like those kind of people nagging."

Talking to Amitabh at a later point, like Shonali, I asked him about Monty. Amitabh started joking about him. I conveyed what I knew about him, his business, his family history, while he gave me the impression that he was neither aware nor interested in any details about Monty, who I never heard him call anything else but "naughty boy." This was despite the fact that he drove with him an hour a day to come to the racecourse.

The above example illustrates a general trend among gamblers. Whenever I would ask people about the private lives of other gamblers, they would show what I interpret as a willful ignorance. It is not relevant here whether they have the information or not about each other, rather, what is relevant is whether they practice knowing or not-knowing. The example also intimates that the ignorance, is not only practiced by the gamblers, but may be reinforced by their families. Shonali (to some extent) showed an unwillingness to know about her husband's gambling life, which she translated into a question of class and manners.

The practice of ignorance is in many situations related to various kinds of secrecy. As shown, the practice of ignorance can manifest itself as an unwillingness to know, even though information is accessible. But ignorance can also be the result of actual lack of information. Dilley stresses that ignorance is not always manifested as the unwillingness to know, but can also be a product of not having the access to actual information (Dilley 2010, 177). One way to control the ignorance of others, I reckon, is through secrecy. Secrecy was a common thing both within the gambling space, and between the gambling space and the nongambling space. Within the racecourse, there was the secrecy about what each person was betting on and about the information on the race that one might have. Outside, several gamblers told me that they held their gambling a secret from their wives, who thought they were at work when they were at the racecourse. What hit me was that they would tell me this without any

signs of moral guilt but rather of moral awareness, as if it was part of protecting their wives. I will return to this point when discussing secrecy in relationship to god.

The above ethnography also gives an idea of how the decontextualizing moves of gamblers translate into a methodological problem. One problem was that it was difficult to get physical access to the part of their lives, the family life, which did not revolve around gambling. Only with the ones with whom I became very close could I cross that barrier. This was a barrier that was not crossed between gamblers, but which I purposely pushed my way through. Also as mentioned, at the racecourse it was difficult to get an insight into their lives outside the racecourse, as conversations were restricted to the races as well as to joking.

Jests were thus, like ignorance and secrecy, a way to avoid the nongambling space entering the gambling space, whether on the racecourse or not. The constant practice of joking at times seemed to intensify outside the racecourse when in groups, as if the closer people got to each others nongambling lives, the more important jokes were to maintain a separation from it. Gamblers themselves see this as part of an overall characteristic of all gamblers as fun lovers. However, jokes are not just fun because they can make you laugh, they can partake in the creation of a space, which is free from the constraints of the everyday life, associated primarily with family responsibilities as well as with moral standards that are hard to follow.

I have used the notion of decontextualization since I reckon that it opens up an understanding of the interconnection of practices, which in different ways establishes a kind of separation. Above, I have identified ignorance, secrecy, and joking as examples of such strategies through which an alternative disconnected space may be created. Here it is disconnected from "the everyday life," which is defined in relationship to the alternative space, by the lack of gambling activities within that space. The alternative space is thus a practice space created through the practice of boundaries. The need for such a space in this case, I furthermore suggest, has to be understood in relationship to a prevailing morality on gambling. Just as ignorance can be an entry to study knowledge, decontextualization can be an interesting entry to the study of its flip side, the contexts, which are held at a distance, in this case a moral context.

Separated Morality—on Religion and Gender

Dilley identifies ignorance as being connected to morality (Dilley 2010, 178). Knowledge brings along with it morality, and ignorance can thus be

a way to leave out moral systems. For example, if one does not know the gambling story of the Mahabharata, one also does not know the moral on gambling associated with it. Ignorance as an unwillingness to know can thus be a way of keeping prevailing morality at a distance.

Dilley even writes that "the claim of ignorance becomes a moral weapon for those caught up in conflict" (Dilley 2010, 188). He describes how the moral weapon can be fired through the claim of other people's ignorance while being unwilling to know what they know. The gap between one's knowledge and the other's ignorance is then tied to a difference of moral position. However, the moral weapon as I have observed seems to me far more defensive than offensive. It is used for protection through the establishment of a separation of knowledge rather than through a hierarchy of knowledge. In other words, if we see the practice of ignorance—or a form of decontextualization—as a defensive weapon at the racecourse, it is used to keep certain morals out, which prevails among family members and in society in general. The conflict here is the avoidance of conflict between two worlds or spaces that the gamblers take part in, the gambling and the nongambling. Gambling as an alternative thus offers a space with different moral standards than the everyday.

The absence of religion at the racecourse points to such a defensive practice, through which the moral of the outside world is kept out. Perhaps I need to say a bit more about the everyday morality on gambling in relationship to Hinduism and Hindu mythology; which we touched upon at the bar of the Gymkhana Club. In Hindu mythology, the gods and goddesses love to gamble (Handelman and Shulman 1997). However, it is for gods to gamble, not humans. When and if humans gamble, the world becomes chaotic. In those situations, gods do interfere, and try to sort things out, but there are limits as to how much they can protect the people from themselves. This is an important message of the Mahabharata. Whenever I was presenting my study on "horse racing and gambling in India" to nongamblers, they would immediately start talking about the Mahabharata, through which they were clearly framing gambling in relationship to a certain moral judgment, as hinted above. Whereas one of the first legal texts of India from approximately 200 BC stated the need to act against gambling only when people would be out of control (Manu 1991). However, later, throughout the 1990s the leading Hindu nationalistic party, targeted gambling in general as a moral evil.

One other association with gambling is Diwali, a Hindu festival, during which however, gambling is not condemned. Here gambling is ritualized, and played in the homes, and on a number of occasions I was told that gambling during Diwali could not be categorized as gambling, as the money remains within the house or among friends and family, and thus it may be seen as a ritual of giving. My point is, that whereas the religious morality on gambling might be slightly ambiguous, it does impose a problem on the regular gamblers, which means that rather than attempting at redrawing moral lines, they keep religion at distance.

I realized the overall significance of the absence of signs of religious symbols and rituals in the racecourse when one evening I was having beer with a group of friends from the racecourse. I asked one of them, who was a Sikh, what Sikhism had to say about gambling. "I am sorry. I prefer not to talk about God when I drink. When I talk about God I want to be pure." Similarly, gamblers when ignoring questions about religion and gambling, were actually making God relevant to their gambling, by keeping God out of the racecourse. Later, that evening this same person told me proudly how he kept his gambling a secret from his wife. It seemed to happen with the same logic as the unwillingness to talk about God when drinking. Thus ignorance and secrecy were used for the same purpose of separating gambling from a more pure space inhabited by wives and gods. The separation was thus not a ignorance of morals, but in fact a practice of morals. The same moral logic lies in the secrecy toward the gamblers wives.

Interestingly, at the racecourse there *were* a few religious symbols, but only around those who were supposedly there for work. Above several bookmakers stalls there were *swastikas* (a sign used to denote good luck), and in some of the stalls of the *totalisator* (a computerized betting system which calculates odds based on the distribution of bets in a betting pool, also called pari-mutual betting) there were posters of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and fortune. These were signs and posters put up by employees (as is often the case in any shop in India) to bring fortune into their jobs, and more importantly, demarcating their presence as workers, as opposed to the morally condemned gamblers. These signs were never acknowledged by the gamblers, and I rarely saw religious signs carried by the gamblers or any religious gestures among them.

Generally gamblers would not even use the word "gambling" but rather "winning-losing." Whenever I would use the word, they would assume that the questions I was asking was about their morality, and they would repeat sentences like: "I don't go with prostitutes. I only drink a little, and I don't smoke. The only vice I have is gambling." This moral contextualization did have its source in various religious informed categorizations of impurity or sins, where these practices are categorized together (the Hindu *Laws of Manu*, the Sikh *Rehit Maryada*, and the

Muslim *Quran*). So in these cases they were using the religious categorizations of human vices only to break them up so that they could distance themselves from them.

At one point, asking a Sikh woman (the regular female gamblers could be counted on the fingers of two hands) whether she was allowed to gamble according to her faith, she told me "No, as long as one keeps it a secret one can gamble. Most of the men here don't tell their wives that they gamble." Whenever I would ask the male gamblers about their wives, they would say very little but similar things, like when Amitabh told me "She is very pure. She doesn't smoke, drink, eat meat or gamble." His description and emphasis on purity hinted to me of the typical idealized Hindu housewife. From that introduction I got an image of Shonali as being a woman fully supportive of her husband, spending most the day preparing food and supporting her children. Therefore I got quite surprised when I found out from her that she was a financial adviser in a bank and away from the home most of the day. The moral spheres were not just oriented at a separation between the racecourse and the outside, but also through a practice of gendering morality. The wives were indirectly protecting their husbands from moral degeneration through their own purity, and therefore it was important for the men to protect their wives from the gambling space.

Consequently, my informants, despite my showing interest in participating in all the gambling related practices with them, would try to keep me away from the betting ring, which they thought of as an improper place. Most of the few female gamblers would have men or "runners" go into the ring for them, and my informants would offer their assistance to protect me from the place. Generally, the people there had a very hard time positioning me. Some thought that I was a British horse expert, some thought I was the girlfriend of some of my key informants, however, as I with time spoke to more and more men, the majority came to think of me as a gambling prostitute.

I myself had for different reasons kept my own family out of the racecourse during my fieldwork, largely for practical reasons, so that I could maintain a focus while in the field. One day when I decided to bring my two-year-old daughter to the racecourse, it was interesting to notice how the people who would normally come up to me, asking me how I was doing, or giving me a tip, kept a distance from me. When I entered the café, where I would daily be invited to join some of the people at their tables, I did not get a single smile from the crowd; I was simply being ignored. I had become socially dead, and got a clear sense of having done something wrong by bringing her. As a general rule, you will only bring children on one day of the year; namely at the Derby. At the day of the Derby, in between races, there are dance performances, and the atmosphere of a *mela* or fair. It was the only day, in which the racing was between 10 and 2 o'clock, which enabled the punters to bet on a regular race at a different racecourse from 2 o'clock and onward after their family had left. Interestingly, a bookmaker told me that betting was less during the Derby as compared to the regular race later the same day. Thus, when the outside life was brought into the racecourse it was either ignored (as I was with my child), or the races were decontextualized from gambling (as during Derby).

Above, I have tried to contextualize the decontextualizing moves of gamblers with a general morality on gambling outside the racecourse, in order to understand the willful ignorance of the nongambling identities of gamblers as well as the absence of religion among gamblers when gambling. I have looked into how an outside morality on gambling is handled inside a gambling space, as part of the creation of a different joyful moral space, as well as how it is supported from the outside through the creation of spaces beyond willful knowing. The practices one may say are typical characteristics of addictive behavior, and ways of protecting the addiction. However, this does not make it less interesting as a social behavior grounded in complex moral systems related to issues of religion, economics, class, law, and gender, which I can only convey part of in this chapter. Furthermore, considering the extent of legal and illegal gambling in India, it is important not to reduce it to pathological behavior, as gambling may in fact be a reflection of a way of ordering a social (and economic) world through practices of establishing alternative moral spaces.

Money or Status at Stake?

The practice of decontextualization somehow stands in opposition to the anthropological practice, and maybe therefore it can be harder to work with, since it goes against the intuitive analytical practice of contextualization, which the anthropologist is trained in. As a clear example of the anthropological contextualization stands Clifford Geertz's (1973) text on a Balinese cockfight. The text is known as an example of "thick description," through which detailed ethnography of a social drama is contextualized so that it grasps important elements of the society in which it takes place. For Geertz, what is at stake in betting on cocks is not only money, but social prestige (Geertz 1973, 143). In that sense, the meaningfulness of the gambling is calculated in relationship to the nongambling life.

And this meaning or social significance, according to Geertz, compensates for the economic costs involved. Also, betting strategies depend on social affiliations, which exist outside the cockfight arena, and there are implicit gambling rules, which are associated with norms of social relationships in the Balinese village.

This was not the case among my informants at the racecourse where I conducted my main fieldwork. Betting strategies were not connected to goals beyond the racetracks. Winning at the racecourse did not translate into status outside the racecourse. In fact there was little mention about one's winning—or losing for that matter—as soon as one exited from the racecourse. Gamblers in between races would continue to talk about gambling, but more about upcoming races than the winners and losers of the day. Even when winning 100,000 rupees, the day would be like any other day. There would be no big celebration, and the gamblers would not even let their family or friends know. Generally, more money would not be spent than on a regular day, as it would not spillover into their private economy, but would be put into next day's gambling budget. Thus the decontextualization of the racecourse was not only at a social level, but also at an economic level, not unlike the Bohannen's separation of economic spheres, where certain commodities remains in separated economic exchange systems (Bohannan and Bohannan 1968).

I am not questioning Geertz's analysis of the Balinese cockfight based on my own ethnography. Rather it seems that the cockfights are much more integrated into the everyday life of a Balinese village than horse racing is in the everyday life of urban India. Consequently, gambling in Geertz's village might be illegal, but does not seem morally stigmatized. Geertz's analysis should be understood in relationship to previous attempts to understand the nature of games and gambling. At the time of writing, French sociologist Roger Caillois's, *Man, Play, Games*, which has been read as a commentary of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 1970) had influenced the understanding of play, as he defines play through a clear opposition from "ordinary life" (Caillois 2001). Conversely, for Geertz the play is pure representation of "ordinary life" or nonplay.

Geertz' text has had a major influence, not so much on studies on games and gambling, but on anthropology in general as well as on other disciplines, and therefore the validity of his approach has also been passionately debated (Roseberry 1982; Shankman 1984) among other things for the seductive narrative style. The critique I wish to set forth is of a different sort, directly associated with the approach to gambling in the text. I question what the neglect of the addicted gamblers and others

who Geertz observes at the periphery might do to his analysis. Geertz focuses on the significance of gambling for those people who already have status to put at stake. It seems as if the hierarchy of Bali translates into a hierarchy in his analysis, where he favors the significance of the fight for a social elite. The significance of the betting becomes defined by what he calls "status gambling" rather than "money gambling." The addicted gambler is seen as an exception to his analysis, as for them, gambling is about money (Geertz 1973, 434). In that sense, the significance of the gamble is defined by the center of the cockfights rather than by the periphery, and is thus not situated in an overall power structure.

A similar analysis might have evolved, had I focused on the elite of horse racing, namely, breeders and large-scale owners, who are also known among regular gamblers and bookmakers to be high-stakes gamblers. Interestingly, their prestige is associated with their position in the horse racing industry rather than with them as gamblers. They have full-time "runners" employed to do all gambling transactions for them without having to be physical present at the racecourses except for when their horses are running. If their horse wins, they pose smiling for the photographer with their trophy, and receive the prize money, which compared to the amount they have won at betting is rather low.

Geertz constructs the cockfight as a symbolic representation of the Balinese society, rather than bringing insight into how different informants construct the link—or not (partly linked to his narrative style). My point is that in the case of gambling at the racecourse the construction of such links (or contexts) depends on how one has managed to be positioned as a "punter" or a "professional," rather than predisposed identities connected to an Indian class system. Yet, where the professionals who were often owners would bring their outside identity into the racecourse, those who were "just" punters were creating a separation between their "inside" and "outside" life through an ignorance of each other's class background, which was in sharp contrast to an everyday obsession with class. Through the practiced ignorance, a more ambiguous order of class was created, in a setting, which from other vantage points can be seen as a clear representation of a class system (Cassidy 2002; Fox 1999; Reith 2006, 109).

Framing Play

In order to explore the relationship between gambling and nongambling life a bit further, I wish to bring in English anthropologist Gregory Bateson and his theory on play as well as frames. What is interesting

about Bateson is that he acknowledges the reality of play. Play is real as long as you are in the frame of play. What is outside the frame of play is not a reality as opposed to play, but another level of framed life (Bateson 1972, 189). Frames according to Bateson are of a psychological character and are created through meta-communication in order to avoid paradoxes. The frame separates one level of reality from another by setting up its own set of rules from which to experience that framed reality, an idea, which shares some interesting traits with Caillois characteristics of games (Caillois 2001).

Bateson sees the framing of the play as the most important part of understanding games. Part of the game is to ignore the frame, which separates whatever happens within the frame of play from nonplay. The frame is however, constantly being upheld through a certain practice of meta-communication. Thus the ignorance of the frame and what is outside it enables a reality of play, which is not characterized by paradoxes, between the two levels of reality or spaces.

If we employ Bateson's ideas, and we say that gambling is play, then part of the meta-communication of framing the game, I suggest, is done through decontextualization. The active exclusion of what is not considered part of the game creates a context, which is mostly internally directed. What Bateson's ideas also open up to, is a nonhierarchical relationship between play and reality, as there can be frames within frames, which makes it difficult to identify a frameless "real" reality. For many gamblers whom I met, they spent most their waking hours either at the racecourse, or elsewhere talking or thinking about the races. The reality established within the gambling frame, thus could seem just as real and powerful as the nongambling reality. In this chapter, I have purposely not made a distinction between gambling and everyday life, but have differentiated between gambling and nongambling life, since it would be misleading, as gambling fills a large part of their everyday life. The point I wish to make is that the decontextualizing moves, for example, practiced through jokes or ignorance, is a kind of meta-communication part of framing and maintaining a play consciousness.

However, there are times when this frame is not upheld, and where I have seen a complete change in my informants. Visiting Amitabh in his home with his wife and son, I saw how he completely changed as he lost his playful characteristics. I felt as if he had shrunk in my eyes along with the disappearance of the self-confidence that he showed at the racecourse. His wife had even told me that she sometimes had thought that Amitabh was living in the past; that he had not been able to follow the time, which was passing, as he was mainly only living in his gambling life.

Whether enforced from the outside or encouraged from the inside, whether driven by the wish to protect oneself or others from moral judgment, the daily practice of decontextualization at the racecourse, takes time from another life, which is not lived, as it is actively kept out of the gambling space. This may have immense consequences, not only economic but also social, for the life outside the frame of play. Based on an ethnographic study conducted by Irving Zola among off-track punters in the United States in the 1960s, Zola argues in line with the dominant functionalist approaches of the time, that the isolation of the gambling life from the society at large, serves to reinforce and preserve some values of the larger social system, which these people are unwilling or incapable of pursuing in real life (Zola 1967). Instead, they seek out successes and failures within a closed system, which prevents them from resisting the dominant values of the society in which they live.

Conclusion—Gambling as an Alternative Space

The alternative space, which I have been trying to grasp in this chapter, is not the racecourse per se in geographical terms, but rather what exists at a meta-level through a social practice of framing, which evades nongambling life. The alternative space is framed through decontextualization of nongambling life and the production of a context, which is basically internal. Everything that goes on at the racecourse is only made meaningful in the context of the racecourse and the Indian racing Industry.

Gambling might be a rather extreme case in which to study an alternative space, identified above, as a parallel sphere of living. However, an attention to decontextualizing moves, done through such practices as ignorance, secrecy, and jests, might give insight into how people attempt to create isolated or parallel spaces for themselves. The alternative space might be practiced within a demarcated physical space, but does not need to be. The alternative space is a practiced space, and thus the building stones of the walls of the space are first of all actions that creates mental and symbolic boundaries to the part of their life, which is dominated by the "mainstream society" and its moralities. As I have shown, mainstream society can be physically present at the racecourse, and also the gambling life can be taken outside the racecourse. Yet, in these situations, the two spaces are separated through different decontextualization moves such as ignoring family identity and sticking to a joking mode of communication. In fact, the practice of the alternative space I believe can most easily be identified at the boundaries, when the ignorance is challenged, as when I brought my daughter to the racecourse, because

this is where most of the decontextualization moves, which create those boundaries, occur.

Paying attention to the practice of alternative spaces opens up to an understanding of life lived in different spheres rather than life lived in wholesomeness, which may be seen as a characteristic of modern life. Yet it is important to note, that as an alternative space the racecourse is used by people mostly of the Indian middle class as a kind of refuge from a particular kind of being, framed by morals of mainstream society related primarily to family, religion and class. Therefore, it is not a space, which is to generate emancipation from or change in the mainstream society, as it remains separated from it. Through legislation, the space exists as a legal place, despite the existence of illegal gambling within. Yet, the formal legality is not enough to give it moral legitimacy, and therefore the space remains in a state of ambiguity, which is temporarily overcome through decontextualizing moves.

Note

1. All names in the chapter are pseudonyms.

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